

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR

How and where and what we drink and eat?

In origin, man is a fruit-picking primate who turned hunter. His feeding behaviour today reflects this dual personality. In many ways he is still a harmless sweet-tooth, but in others he is a prey-killing carnivore.

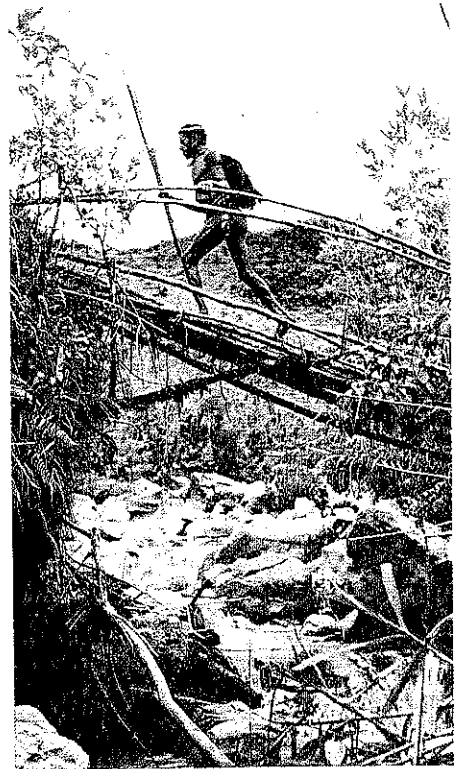
When the human feeding story began, our early ancestors were searching the forest trees for nuts, berries and fruits, like present-day monkeys and apes. They were highly sensitive to the many changing colours, textures, shapes and tastes of their food objects. Once found and picked, the food often required special preparation before it could be eaten, but each member of the tribe acted for himself in all respects. There was no food-sharing, no concerted effort. The group would move about together, shifting from food site to food site, but beyond that, feeding was a personal problem.

The switch from the trees to more open ground and the adoption of a hunting life-style changed all this. The adult males became the prey-killers, setting off from a fixed home base and returning with the kill. The females, the young and the elderly confined themselves to food-gathering nearer the home base, continuing to collect roots, berries and nuts in the old primate way.

This new pattern of feeding brought several major social changes in its wake. The most important was co-operation. The male hunters had to co-operate to bring down large prey. They had to co-operate to get it home. They had to share the kill. Also, the division of labour between males and females meant that they had to share as well—meat for vegetables and vegetables for meat.

The human hunter is often depicted as a savage killer, but this is strictly a my's-eye view. Within the human community itself, the change to hunting meant a change to mutual aid and friendly co-operation—the very opposite of 'savagery'. It also meant that feeding occasions became social events, rather than personal activities.

How are these ancient origins reflected in our modern eating habits? We still follow the mixed-diet pattern of meat plus vegetables. This remains the typical human menu the world over. The fact that 10,000 years ago farming took over as the dominant method of obtaining food has not altered our dual interest in plant and animal substances.



Man is a fruit-picking primate turned hunter and prey-killer. For more than a million years primeval male hunters set out on the chase, rather as some remote tribesmen still do today (above), while the women continued to gather fruits, berries and roots from sites near the home camp.



This mixed, meat-and-veg diet is still enjoyed by the vast majority of modern eaters and ghosts of the old division-of-labour system still survive. Meat is still 'male food', to be carved by the man, and vegetables are still 'female food' to be served by the woman.



What farming did do, however, was to start a major trend towards more and more specialized food production. Instead of everyone being involved in finding food, it now became a task for farmers only. The rest of the population could concentrate more on other matters, until, with today's vast urban communities, the business of obtaining food is reduced to the unadventurous act of shopping in food-stores.

This situation has robbed the modern feeder of some of his ancient behaviour patterns. Gone are the excitements of the hunt—the thrill of the chase, the cunning of the trap, the plotting of the strategy, the climax of the kill, the risk-taking and uncertainty, and the comradeship of the all-male hunting group. When the modern female goes food-gathering at the green-grocer's, she also stops off at the butcher's. Unlike her ancient counterpart, she brings home the bacon as well as the beans.

As a result of this, the modern male is a huntless hunter, a tracker without a quarry, a chaser with nothing to pursue. He solves the problem by indulging in symbolic hunting. For many males, 'working' takes on the qualities of a hunt, with manoeuvres and stratagems, tactics and traps. He plans business campaigns and he makes 'killings' in the city; he sits on all-male committees that replace the old hunting groups, and he speculates. In taking chances and working towards a climax, he manages to re-live, in the symbolism of the business world, the ancient excitements of the hunt.

If his working situation lacks these qualities, he can resort to other means. He can join all-male clubs, he can gamble, or he can indulge in some kind of sport. These activities replace at least some of the missing hunting pattern. The clubs provide the male comradeship, the gambling involves risk-taking and a climax, and the sporting events manage to recreate almost the complete behaviour sequence of the whole hunting pattern.

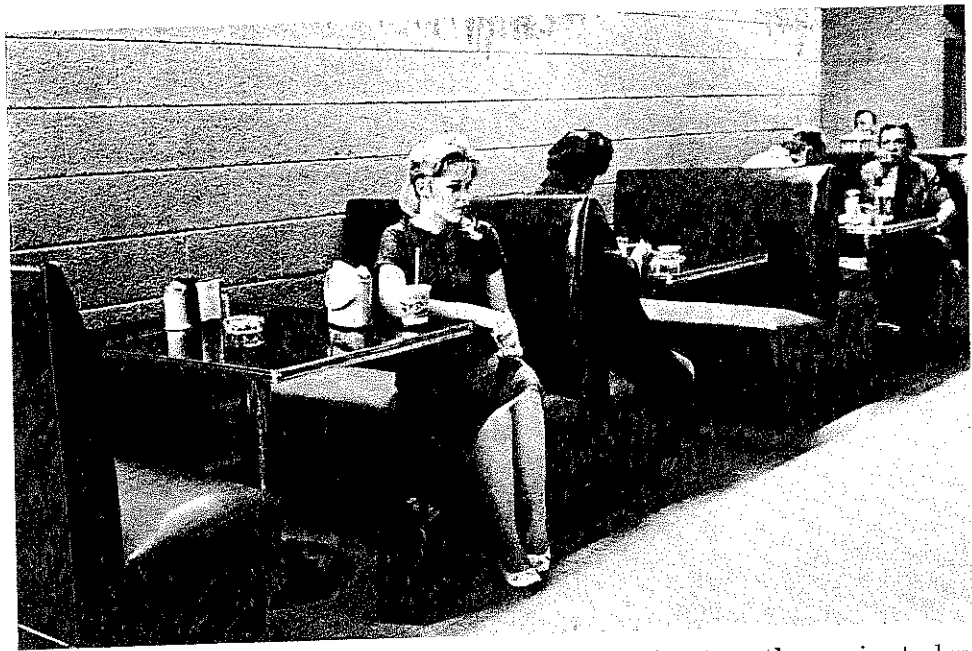
When he does finally sit down to a meal, the modern male pseudo-hunter may not have caught and killed the prey that is being served up for eating, but he has at least filled in the 'hunting hours' before the meal with a suitable substitute for the chase. At the table, his hunting role survives in a few relic patterns. He sits at the head of the table and it is he who carves the meat (the 'male' food) while his mate passes around the vegetables (the 'female' food). At a restaurant, it is the male who controls the waiter, places the orders, and tastes the wine.

The timing of meals also owes something to our ancient hunting past. As primeval fruit-pickers in the tree-tops, we must have been non-stop snack-takers, like other 'vegetarian' primates. For them, feeding is not a case of sitting down to a big meal, it is a matter of nibble-here, nibble-there, and



The butcher's shop has become the modern hunting ground, but now it is the woman who carries home the 'kill', while her male engages in symbolic hunting, called 'work'.

itive hunting led to food-sharing, which can still be seen today, at the tribal (far left), or in the Western style (left). sitting down together at a table. Time are part of our 'hunter spiritance'. The solitary diner (right) is a lonely figure, often forced to eat and run, rather than linger.



keep on nibbling. But when we switched to become hunters, these minute-by-minute snacks were replaced by the great feast. Like lions, early hunters gorged and then rested, gorged and then rested, alternating massive feeding sessions with long foodless intervals. When hunting gave way to farming, and food-stores were developed, there was once again a ready supply of morsels for non-stop nibbling to reassert itself, but the prolonged period of hunting had left its mark, and we never again abandoned our carnivorous, 'big meal' approach to feeding.

For modern man, this means an average of three meals a day—breakfast, lunch and supper. There is no need for us to follow this routine, but we seem reluctant to abandon it. We have the technology to replace it with regular, balanced snacks, every hour on the hour, which would put far less strain on our stomachs, but we do not do so. This would rob us of the 'hunter's feast' quality of the meal. In particular, it would rob us of that most essential feature of the hunting world—the act of food-sharing. Meals are social events. We go to a great deal of trouble to avoid eating alone. The solitary diner always has a curiously forlorn, self-conscious quality. And it is said that the very best way of losing weight is to avoid eating in company.

The food-sharing quality of the modern meal is the reason why so much social entertaining is done in the form of lunch-parties and dinner-parties. These are today's food-sharing rituals and represent a major survival from our hunting past. Even casual social encounters—the arrival of an unexpected guest—involve offerings of food: 'Can I get you something, a drink perhaps?' Drinks are, after all, only liquid foods, and the drink-sharing ritual is as basic as the formal food-party.

In one way we do still revert to our very ancient fruit-picking past. In between our main meals we often indulge in minor nibblings. We take coffee-breaks or tea-breaks. We munch biscuits, crunch apples, chew candy and suck sweets. We have whole shops devoted to the sale of these objects, and as food morsels they all have one thing in common: their sweetness. The essential quality of wild fruits and berries that makes them attractive is their process of ripening and becoming sweeter and sweeter. This is what appeals to the primate fruit-picker, and this is what we still look for in those modern-day replicas of our old tree-top food-objects.

Only when we sit down to a big, hunter's meal do we switch our food goals from sweet to meat. At lunch and supper, the sequence of the meal is revealing: we start with meat and end with sweet. We make the 'main dish' the hunter's triumph, the food-sharing social food, but then we like to finish off the meal with sweeter tastes that can linger on and satisfy our persistently



surviving 'sweet tooth'. Smaller meals tend to be generally sweeter, with the main meat course omitted. This is true of most breakfasts and afternoon teas. Where a bigger breakfast is taken—the British breakfast, for example—the meal starts sweet (porridge or cereals), then moves to meat (kippers or eggs and bacon), and ends sweet (toast and marmalade or jam). This follows the same pattern as lunch and supper, except for the addition of a sweet course at the beginning of the meal. It seems as if, emerging from sleep into another active day, the modern feeder cannot immediately throw himself into the role of a hunting-eater. He has to start off with a little simple 'sweet-toothing'. And for most, the breakfast will go no further. For those that do follow up the initial mouthfuls with a full-blown meal, there then follows the standard sequence of meat/sweet, to complete the repast.

The predominance of sweetness in the breakfast diet relates to the fact that this is the least social of meals—the least talkative and the least concerned with food-sharing. Breakfast parties have always been much rarer than lunch or dinner parties, and are likely to remain so. Breakfasts are also likely to retain another special quality: monotony. We nearly always eat the same thing for breakfast, but usually try to vary the midday and evening menu as much as possible. This is because we are at our most insecure in the morning, with all the unknowns of the day ahead of us. When we wake, we need the reassurance of something familiar to see us through the first moments, and this familiarity is provided by the unvarying breakfast menu.

The greatest food-sharing event of the year for early agricultural communities was the moment when the long winter phase passed its mid-point. This was the moment to break out the food-stores for a special celebration. After months of harvesting and hoarding, it was at last possible to risk a major exchange of food-gifts and a feast to herald in the new year. During these yuletide festivities early farmers gave one another presents of food, and our modern custom of giving Christmas presents is a descendant of this ancient practice, just as our modern Christmas dinner is a descendant of the ancient pagan feasting.

When food is brought to the table, it is with a concentrated 'food-stare', especially at the moment when it is being placed on the diner's plate. It is almost as if we are watching the ancient hunter sighting his prey.

Other primitive survivals from our ancient eating past include a strong preference for foods with the colours of ripe nuts, fruits and roots—whites, reds, browns and yellows. If we are offered the same foodstuffs dyed blue, we find them instantly repulsive. Even today, we eat remarkably few blue foods despite advanced technology.



Another survival from the past is our curious reluctance to eat blue foods or drink blue drinks. Turn the pages of any illustrated cook-book, and there are hundreds of reds, yellows, greens, browns and oranges—but not a blue in sight. Even the rare exceptions are hardly true blue. Blue cheese is predominantly yellow and blueberry is almost black. This is not because we lack blue colouring. Cake-shops occasionally offer confections covered in a blue icing. But for some reason we do not exploit this colour where eating and drinking are concerned. And we seldom employ blue colours in the wrappings of foodstuffs. Other products, at the pharmacy or the ironmongers, are often swathed in blue, as are cleaning materials such as detergents and soaps, but food and drink remain stubbornly anti-blue.

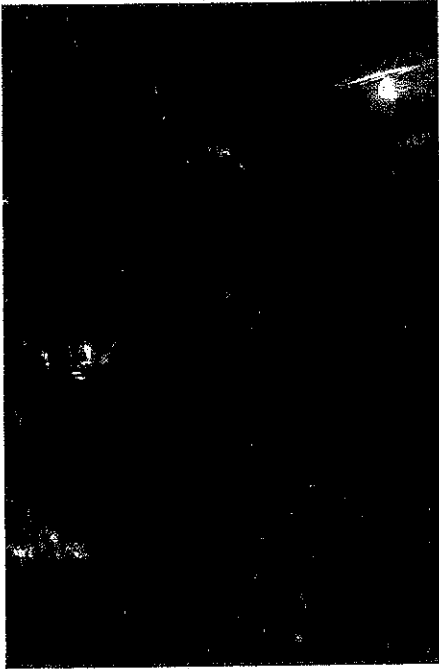
The blue taboo appears to be a throwback to our primitive eating habits. Natural foods were nuts and seeds (brown and yellow), fruits and roots (orange, red and white), leaves and shoots (green); with hunting added, there was also the white of fish and poultry, and the red and brown of the various meats. But no blue. And so it remains today, with the ancient bluelessness of food surviving into an epoch that can play with food colours in almost any way it likes.

Another ancient survival is the strange business of 'backs to the wall' when feeding in public. Observe diners arriving at any restaurant and you will see them make a bee-line for the wall-seats. No one ever voluntarily selects a centre table in an open space. Open seating positions are only taken when all the wall-seats are already occupied. This dates back to a primeval feeding practice of avoiding sudden attack during the deep concentration involved in consuming food. It is a moment when it is easy to be taken off-guard, and the eater always tries to make it possible for himself to see the whole space around him. To get the best, most protected view, he must have his back against a wall, and this is why many restaurants put up small screens around their centre tables. By providing partitions to every table, they give a sense of security to their customers as they munch their food. A well partitioned restaurant provides an almost 100 per cent 'backs-to-the-wall' facility, making it the most attractive proposition for modern diners haunted by ancient fears, even though, in the process, it makes the serving of food by waiters extremely awkward and cumbersome.

The concentrated food-stare is never so acute as at the moment of the 'plate arrival'. As the diner's food approaches, his eyes are glued to the heaped dish being placed in front of him. No better moment could be chosen to assassinate an enemy, so rivetted is his attention at this second. Even if he is deep in conversation at the moment of plate arrival, his eyes still fixate the steaming dish, as if his very life depended upon seeing it now, at this first possible instant. To watch a modern diner sighting his dish is rather like seeing a cat sight a mouse, and it is tempting to see in this reaction the ghost of an ancient hunter spotting his prey.

Because there is a certain tension involved in eating in public, restaurants employ two major trends to exploit the mood of their diners. The expensive restaurant, to justify high prices, has to overcome the tensions. It does this by shielding, screening and partitioning and also by keeping lights dim, often with orange-red glows, sounds muffled, with thick carpets and soft drapes, colours soft, with neutral or pastel tones, and movements slow, by having more staff than usual so as to reduce waiter-speeds, and frequently fires visible, to give a sense of cosiness and warmth. In this way, the top restaurant makes its clients relax and feel at peace with the world. Lingering over their meals, they are prepared to pay the large sums eventually demanded. The cheap restaurant uses the opposite device of making the eating space as harsh and unappealing as possible, in order to rush its customers through their eating. In this way its low prices can be balanced by a rapid turnover. To make its eaters flee the eating-site, it uses intense strip-lighting, harsh, bright colours, clanking metallic trays and hard, uncovered table surfaces. No sooner has the food been hurriedly consumed, than the table is thankfully





The slight tension caused by eating in public, surrounded by strangers, is overcome by the screening of tables, to give a backs-to-the-wall sensation, and the use (as seen here) of dim lighting. Cheap restaurants use harsher lights to hurry customers through their meals and thereby ensure a rapid turnover.

vacated, making way for another customer and another payment for food. Being a primate fruit-picker turned meat-eater, the human animal has had certain problems with his teeth. Since he has essentially remained an omnivore, it has been important to keep rather general-purpose dentition. Tough carcasses of freshly killed prey have therefore given him something of a headache. He has solved this difficulty in two main ways: cutlery and cookery.

Cutlery began hundreds of thousands of years ago, with simple blades used to skin carcasses and slice flesh. Eventually stone gave way to copper, copper to bronze, bronze to iron, and iron to steel (with silver and gold invading the sequence at high levels). Early metal knives were nearly always pointed and had a double function—cutting the food and then spearing it for delivery to the mouth. Unfortunately this also made them dangerous weapons and, in 1699, Louis XV of France, fearing assassination, banned the making of sharp-pointed table-knives, a prohibition that has remained with us voluntarily ever since. The blunter knives naturally increased the popularity of that other essential piece of cutlery, the fork. Forks had been slowly gaining ground at table, with two-handed tool-using gradually taking over from the more primitive one-handed style. Because the more ancient knife had already become established as a right-handed implement, the fork had to make do with the left hand. In some areas—the United States for example—there was a resistance to this. There the fork was held in the left hand to steady the food object being sliced by the knife, but once the cutting was completed, the knife was put down and the fork laboriously transferred from left hand to right for the final spearing and delivering of food to the mouth. This brave attempt of the fork to invade the knife's righteous position has proved too cumbersome for most cultures. Almost everywhere, the two-handed operation survives—fork-in-left, knife-in-right. A major exception occurs in the Orient, where chopsticks dominate. This is because, in comparatively table-free eating context, the diner must hold the food-bowl in his hand and must deal with its contents one-handed. Although chopsticks are less efficient than the two-handed knife-and-fork combination, they remain more effective than any other form of one-handed eating, and have survived well. But as high-table eating gradually invades the East, we can expect to see their slow eclipse.

Knives and forks, along with spoons and tongs and various other food-tools, lie on the modern table like metallic super-teeth, extending our bite, our grind and our chew. Together they give us every kind of tooth in the textbook of evolution, without so much as a sliver of bone being added to our real jaws. Aiding and abetting this process is the business of cooking. The use of fire—and, even before that, the simmering of food in the waters of natural hot springs—is an ancient practice that has served to tenderize a wide variety of food objects and reduce the demands made on our unspecialized teeth. Baking, boiling, roasting, grilling, stewing and poaching, we attack our plant and animal foods. We break down the hard cell-walls of vegetables, we soften hard grain, and we weaken meat fibres. In the process, we not only tenderize, but also improve flavour and destroy parasites. And perhaps by serving hot, we rekindle the memories of the natural heat of freshly killed prey and the body-warmth of our first and most comforting foodstuff—milk from the breast.

As an extension of food-hoarding we have developed smoking, pickling, drying, preserving, bottling, canning, refrigeration and, more recently, deep-freezing and freeze-drying. With our cutlery, our cookery and our preservation techniques, we have become super-gnashers, super-chewers and super-hoarders. We each eat about a ton of food a year, so that we get through more than sixty tons in an average lifetime. To observe this process in action is to watch a fascinating combination of ancient habits and modern skills, a complete amalgam of primitive feeding patterns and technological inventions.